

John C. Calhoun Sees "Slavery in its True Light..." (1838)

In this excerpt from a speech given in 1838, South Carolina's John C. Calhoun declared that slavery was not a moral evil, as some even in the South (including Thomas Jefferson) had once maintained. He argued that slavery seen in its true light was a blessing to both races (but especially to African-Americans), a haven from the racial warfare that would otherwise break out, and the best and most stable foundation for free society. As you read Calhoun's defense of slavery, consider how he believed that slavery, the ultimate denial of freedom, could be contribute to American freedom. What were the most important attributes of that freedom? What alternative system existed in the North and how did it undermine freedom? How does Calhoun's defense of slavery differ from those from the Revolutionary period?

He saw (said Mr. C[alhoun]) in the question before us the fate of the South. It was a higher than the mere naked question of master and slave. It involved a great political institution, essential to the peace and existence of one-half of this Union. A mysterious Providence had brought together two races, from different portions of the globe, and placed them together in nearly equal numbers in the Southern portion of this Union. They were there inseparably united, beyond the possibility of separation. Experience had shown that the existing relation between them secured the peace and happiness of both. Each had improved; the inferior greatly; so much so, that it had attained a degree of civilization never before attained by the black race in any age or country. Under no other relation could they co-exist together. To destroy it was to involve a whole region in slaughter, carnage, and desolation; and, come what will, we must defend and preserve it.

This agitation has produced one happy effect at least; it has compelled us to the South to look into the nature and character of this great institution, and to correct many false impressions that even we had entertained in relation to it. Many in the South once believed that it was a moral and political evil; that folly and delusion are gone; we see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world. It is impossible with us that the conflict can take place between labor and capital, which make[s] it so difficult to establish and maintain free institutions in all wealthy and highly civilized nations where such institutions as ours do not exist. The Southern States are an aggregate, in fact, of communities, not of individuals. Every plantation is a little community, with the master at its head, who concentrates in himself the united interests of capital and labor, of which he is the common representative. These small communities aggregated make the State in all, whose action, labor, and capital is [*sic*] equally represented and perfectly harmonized. Hence the harmony, the union, and stability of that section, which is rarely disturbed except through the action of this Government. The blessing of this state of things extends beyond the limits of the South. It makes that section the balance of the system; the great conservative power, which prevents other portions, less fortunately constituted, from rushing into conflict. In this tendency to conflict in the North between labor and capital, which is constantly on the increase, the weight of the South has and will ever be found on the Conservative side; against the aggression of one or the other side, which ever may tend to disturb the equilibrium of our political system. This is our natural position, the salutary influence of which has thus far preserved, and will long continue to preserve, our free institutions, if we should be left undisturbed. Such are the institutions which

these madmen are stirring heaven and earth to destroy, and which we are called on to defend by the highest and most solemn obligations that can be imposed on us as men and patriots.